

CONSERVATION INNOVATION GRANTS

Final Report

Grantee Name: Local Food Hub, Inc.

Project Title: Comprehensive Conservation Outreach Training for Limited Resource and Beginning Farmers in Central Virginia.

Agreement Number: 69-33A7-11-28

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Period Covered by Report: 7/1/2011 – 12/31/2012

Project End Date: 12/31/2012

A) Summarize the work performed during the project period covered by this report:

We have formally unveiled our on-line resource library, available to farmers through our website, as well as through printed and digital copies when requested and on farm visits. This database provides us the platform to hold the most current information available and pull from it as needed. Current categories include: Available Funding, Energy Efficiency / Alternative Energy, Food Safety, Farm Financials and Taxes, Farm Labor, Pest Management, Season Extension, and Transition to Organic Production.

Over the course of this project, we have hosted 11 workshops and have used these events as opportunities to disseminate compiled resources related to conservation – primarily in the form of CDs. Examples of workshop topics include Sustainable Soil Management, Permaculture, Ecological Pest Management, Cover Crops and Conservation Tillage, High Tunnel Production, and Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). In our end-of-year survey, 67% of respondents indicated that that these workshops were either ‘important’ or ‘very important’ resources for their farm businesses.

The summer and fall editions of our quarterly Farm Services Newsletter were mailed to over 75 partner farms in June and October respectively. The June issue highlighted our new resource library and our workshop series, while the October issue focused on grant prospecting, USDA programs and services for farmers, and season extension. We have received positive feedback from our partner producers about this new vehicle of communication. In our end-of-year survey, 58% of respondents indicated that these quarterly newsletters were either ‘important’ or ‘very important’ resources for their farm businesses. Although a paper-based newsletter is no longer the norm, we have found that it provides an important option for the demographic we work with.

Our farm visit program is on-going and provides us with an opportunity to meet with our 75 partner producers and see first-hand the challenges they face on their farms and discuss techniques and resources that may be beneficial as they work towards environmental and economic sustainability. Alternative energy strategies and enhanced water management techniques were two areas where we saw consistent demand for information and resources. We received responses from 40 farms on our initial Conservation Practices Assessment.

We continue to establish and strengthen connections within the sustainable agriculture community and with relevant government agencies. Our role in educating the community regarding the importance of conservation in agriculture is accomplished through our two signature events in Spring (Taste of the Farm) and Fall (Community Food Awards), various other smaller events, tours, and presentations, and through associated media coverage.

B) Describe significant results, accomplishments, and lessons learned. Compare actual accomplishments to the project goals in your proposal:

Goal #1: Increase the level and effectiveness of conservation practices at food producing farms in our region.

Multiple approaches were utilized to provide our partner producers with resources relevant to on-farm conservation, including our Workshop Series in Sustainable Agriculture, a new on-line resource library as part of our website, a new paper-based quarterly Farm Services Newsletter, an extensive resource table at our annual meeting, and our on-going farm visit program and regular communication with farmers.

Our late 2011 / 2012 Workshop Series in Sustainable Agriculture consisted of 11 workshops in collaboration with agencies / organizations such as Virginia Cooperative Extension, USDA Agricultural Research Service, Blue Ridge Permaculture Network, Virginia Association of Biological Farmers, NRCS, and Central VA Beekeepers Association. We have developed a three-page curriculum guide to manage our workshop series. In addition to class handouts, participants received resource CD's based on the contents of our mobile library and relevant to the workshop topics. A comprehensive report on workshop attendance and evaluations is included on the resource disc accompanying this final report.

Workshops presented over the course of this project included:

- July 2011: *Ecological Pest Management* at Maple Hill Farm with Anthony Flaccavento of Appalachia Sustainable Development.
- October 2011: *High Tunnel Production* at Maple Hill Farm with Paul and Allison Wiediger of Au Naturel Farm in Kentucky.
- February 2012: *Farming by the Numbers* with Richard Bean of Double H Farm.
- March 2012: *Sustainable Soil Management* at Maple Hill Farm with Mark Schonbeck from the Virginia Association of Biological Farming.
- April 2012: *Beginning Beekeeping* at Ivy Creek Natural Area and presented by members of the Central Virginia Beekeepers Association.
- June 2012: *Permaculture for Farm and Homestead* at Radical Roots Farm in Keezletown, VA.
- July 2012: *Ecological Pest Management* with Don Weber, Research Entomologist and Lead Scientist for the USDA in Beltsville.
- September 2012: *Cover Crops and Conservation Tillage* with Ron Morse from

Virginia Tech.

- October 2012: *High Tunnel Field Day* at Hill Farm in Louisa County. Dana Bayless (NRCS) was on-hand to discuss the High Tunnel Grant Program, which was extremely beneficial to participants.
- November 2012: *GAP full day training and mock audit* with 4 VCE staff and VDACS representative, Tom Smith.
- December 2012: *Making Money on your Farm* with Ellen Polishuk from Potomac Vegetable Farms.

In January 2012, we held our annual meeting with our partner farms, with approximately 50 people in attendance. We presented a wide array of technical resources relating to water quality, food safety, financial management, season extension and ecological pest control. In addition to handing out printed material, we distributed laminated field guides of beneficial insects and ecological pest management, and a resource CD with extensive supporting documents. We also set up a Resource Table, where farmers were able to pick up soil and water testing kits, among other helpful tools

Goal #2: Strengthen collaborations with governmental, educational, and non-profit institutions to facilitate greater access to information and technical training about conservation in local agriculture.

In addition to the collaborations we have forged through our workshop series, we have entered into training partnerships with The National Good Food Network at the Wallace Center and the Risk Management Agency (RMA) to provide additional advanced technical training to our partner producers. These are exciting opportunities to provide our growers with assistance in scaling up production in the context of responsible environmental stewardship.

As on-farm food safety gains importance through GAP's, we are working actively with VCE and VDACS to serve as a conduit for information and training to local farms making this transition. We are also working on ways to find a balance between the requirements of GAP's and the need to maintain a vibrant, well-balanced farm eco-system.

Over the summer we hosted USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan and met with Carmen Jones, a senior advisor at the USDA to discuss programs and services available to farmers. This was followed by a full day tour and information session with over 20 representatives from the USDA as well as representatives from Virginia State University and other non-profits working with limited resource farmers. We have established new contacts with VSU staff and are excited to work closely with them in years to come. We continue to work closely with staff at Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) on implementing and supporting enhanced on-farm food safety practices through GAP while maintaining environmental integrity and organic practices.

Goal #3: Build community understanding of the role of conservation in local agriculture.

The following events highlighted our efforts in promoting the use of on-farm conservation

practices.

- LFH had an informational booth at the Heritage Harvest Festival at Monticello, Fall 2011.
- LFH staff presented at 2nd VA Food Security Summit at UVA
- LFH staff spoke at the Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture (CASA) annual conference on Jan 13.
- LFH staff spoke at a conference hosted by Piedmont Environmental Council on February 24 and 28.
- LFH staff participated in an Earth Week event at UVA Medical Center in April.
- On May 5, we hosted our annual 'Taste of the Farm' event at the LFH Educational Farm. We had over 500 visitors who spent the day enjoying the farm and learning more about what we do. We developed a self-guided tour with large, in-color signs that provided an excellent learning opportunity for the general public. Highlights of the tour included showcasing practices such as cover cropping, crop rotation, biological pest control, and the healthy benefits of fresh organic produce. Coverage of the event included 2 radio spots, a clip on our local NBC affiliate evening news program, and articles in several local papers.
- LFH staff spoke at a conference, Fostering Sustainable Agriculture for Economic Development, in Rappahannock County on April 19.
- LFH staff spoke to UVA students at the Morven Summer Institute (Studying Local Food Systems) on June 1.
- On October 25, we hosted our annual 'Community Food Awards' event at our warehouse location in Ivy, Virginia. We had over 100 guests representing the community, as well as our buyers and our producers. Awards for LFH producers included: 'Pioneer in the Field,' 'Agricultural Endurance,' and 'Partner Producer of the Year'. In addition, LFH entered into a partnership with Bundoran Farms to offer a competitive annual cash award – Innovation in Agriculture Award. This award highlights and encourages economic and environmental on-farm innovations and we received 8 applications from Local Food Hub partner farms. The 2012 award went to Planet Earth Diversified for their use of waste vegetable oil to heat and power their greenhouses. This event and the associated awards received extensive press coverage.

Goal #4: Evaluate effectiveness of this project and facilitate its replication.

- Conducted evaluations at the end of each workshop – see resource disc for compilations.
- We have revamped our end-of-year surveys for producers and buyers, which were sent out on December 15, 2012. Sample Results:
 - 54.5% of our buyers (restaurants, food service, retailers) purchase local food to help the environment
 - 91% of our buyers report a demand for local food, although that number has not increased over 2011
 - 89% of our buyers report that knowing the growing practices of the farms they purchase from is important to their customers.
 - According to our producers:

- 67% report that the workshop series is an important / very important resource
- 58% report that the Farm Services Newsletter is an important / very important resource
- 36% report that the On-line Resource Library is an important / very important resource

Additional Questions:

1.) Did this NRCS investment pay off?

With a relatively modest investment, NRCS has been able to support over 75 small family farms in the region to gain access to advanced education opportunities and resources relevant to sustainable agriculture practices. In addition, the Conservations Practices Assessment, designed and administered by Local Food Hub staff provides valuable information about what conservation practices are currently in use on area farms and what practices farmers would like to implement in the future. Many resources compiled and developed for this project are openly available through our on-line resource library and there are replicable components, such as our curriculum guides for our workshop series, which may be helpful to other organizations.

2.) What were your lessons learned?

The primary lesson learned is the length of time necessary to develop resources, provide access and trainings, and then gauge the effectiveness in terms of adoption rates of conservation practices. While we were able to design the program, develop and share resources and training, it is not feasible to gauge impact on a broader scale in terms of any systemic changes in farming practices. We also learned, through our initial assessment, that the use of on-farm conservation practices is already significant within the demographic of farmers we are working with.